

Soviet Cinema

Politics and Persuasion
under Stalin



Jamie Miller

I.B. TAURIS

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INTRODUCTION

Existing Research, Aims, Objectives and Methodology

The basic shape of the established Western approach to Soviet cinema, which emerged in the 1930s, and still exists in a traditional, 'totalitarian' form of analysis, suggests that, under Stalinism, the Soviet film industry was brought under the firm grip of an all-embracing, centralised state and administrative system. This system crushed the creative spirit of the 1920s and obliged film-makers to become complicit in the creation of pro-regime film propaganda and the imposition of an artistically weak socialist realist approach.¹ Such accounts were challenged by 'revisionists' who emerged in the 1970s and 1980s. Richard Taylor began looking at Soviet cinema in the 1920s from a political point of view, contending that the Party only began to gain control of the medium at the end of the decade.² Taylor soon turned to the 1930s, arguing against the traditional film history interpretation of the decline into socialist realism. He contended that, while the aim of creating a 'cinema for the millions' was subject to complex political and economic constraints, the film industry and in particular its leader, Boris Shumiatsky, managed to lay the foundations of a genuine mass form of politicised entertainment by the late 1930s.³ Taylor and Ian Christie have also provided researchers with invaluable resources on Soviet cinema in the 1920s and 1930s, through the translation and publication of newspaper/journal articles and other documents, in the collection *The Film Factory*.⁴ Taylor later co-edited a very important contribution to understanding the cinema of the Stalin era and its legacy, *Stalinism and Soviet Cinema*, featuring a range of articles from scholars of different disciplinary backgrounds, including academics from the former Soviet Union. The collection dealt with

the origins, development and legacy of Stalinism in cinema and offered contributions from both the 'totalitarian' and 'revisionist' schools of thought.⁵ Denise Youngblood has also challenged received historical ideas about cinema, but from the broader perspective of revisionist Soviet history. In her *Soviet Cinema in the Silent Era*, Youngblood argued that Stalinism constituted a revolution from below in cinema, but later amended this theory, arguing that there was no mass support for the changes. Instead a 'revolution from the middle' was said to have taken place within the film industry itself.⁶

The approaches of Western revisionists stood in stark contrast to the work of their Soviet counterparts. In the USSR academics, at least formally, saw the Party as the careful guiding hand for the film industry, ensuring that it moved in the correct political direction. For example, Alentina Rubailo examined the process of growing Party control during 1928–37, contending that the Bolsheviks gradually increased their influence in terms of administration, planning and the ideological side of film production. Given that the book was written in the Brezhnev era, it is unsurprising that the author presented a wholly positive account of Party influence and the politicisation of the film industry. Since the collapse of the Soviet system, study of the 1930s has ironically adopted the traditional, 'totalitarian' arguments of the West, concentrating on the supposedly overwhelming influence of Stalin, comparing Soviet films of the 1930s with those of Nazi Germany, and focusing on the negative aspects of the cinema industry. Nonetheless, Russian scholars have recently published a wealth of archival materials which promise the emergence of more nuanced accounts of the interaction between politics and cinema in the 1930s.⁷

Interest in the 1930s has grown and moved in new directions over recent years. The French scholar Natacha Laurent has dedicated an entire book, based on archival sources, to censorship during the Stalinist era (although the particular focus is on the 1940s). Laurent pays special attention to aspects of the decision-making process, providing us with a better understanding of the mechanics of censorship. Among other arguments, she points out that censorship was not only imposed from above, but also involved the film-makers themselves who formed part of a complex web.⁸ Eberhard Nembach provides a useful narrative on the reorganisation of the film industry in the 1930s which favours the bridging of historical divides and provides some new factual information also based on archival research.⁹ Other recent work has tackled new areas, such as

gender and masculinity and the importance of time and space in the films of this era. Yevgeni Dobrenko has devoted a book to the exploration of how Stalinist cinema *produced* history (as opposed to this work which looks at the history of the film industry itself) with film playing the role of a museum that artificially manipulated the past to legitimise the Soviet present. This new work has emerged in a context of increasing interest in the broad domain of Russian and Soviet cinema from academics working in a whole range of disciplinary areas. Such interest is exemplified by the creation of a new journal, *Studies in Russian and Soviet Cinema*.¹⁰

On the one hand, the current work acknowledges the importance and validity of elements of historical interpretations that lean toward traditional or 'totalitarian' approaches. It will be argued throughout that centralised and administrative political control had a fundamental impact on Soviet cinema during the 1930s. Excessive bureaucracy played a large role in undermining the film industry and minimising the potential impact of the envisaged 'cinema for the millions'. Moreover, political violence had a significant impact on cinema especially during the late 1930s. At the same time, however, the analysis argues against certain aspects of the traditional view, especially those that regard Stalin as wielding complete control over the industry and the suggestion that any creativity was completely wiped out during this period. This book also endorses aspects of revisionist accounts. In addition to the fact that cinema was subjected to extreme centralisation and bureaucracy, the film industry was also characterised by organisational chaos and inefficiency. But while these arguments are important to this book, the aim here is to develop a fresh approach to Soviet cinema in the 1930s. If we want to understand why Soviet cinema adopted certain political, economic and organisational forms and why the aims set out for the film industry led to particular outcomes, we must begin by examining the ways of thinking that underpinned its development.

This work not only differs methodologically from previous interpretations of cinema in the 1930s, but it also deals with a broader political subject matter than has traditionally been the case. Areas that have received the particular attention of scholars, such as Peter Kenez, Taylor and Youngblood, include government and Party policy, cinema administration and administrators, censorship, the relationship between politics and socialist realism, questions of genre, the role of popular cinema and close examinations of directors, individual films or groups of films. This book also deals with some of these matters, but aims to use the

aforementioned method to gain a new perspective. So, for example, the analysis agrees, to some extent, with Kenez's view that censorship had a profound impact on film production, but the intention here is to establish why censorship increased in the 1930s and why certain decisions on films or potential films were made. It is a certain mentality that lies behind the elaborate control mechanisms and it is essential that we understand these modes of thought if we are to comprehend what happened to Soviet cinema in the 1930s.

Certain aspects of cinema have received some attention for the period covering the 1930s, but not as much as the 1920s. This is particularly relevant to the economic facets of Soviet cinema.¹¹ I will address this and try to develop a closer examination of the central role of the industry and its infrastructure in reaching the people. I will also address the area of film education and training which has received negligible treatment despite its fundamental importance.¹² Political violence was also of great significance in determining the future direction of the industry in the late 1930s. Again, this is an area which has been discussed, but requires further exploration.¹³ Other areas have been almost completely neglected by film historians, namely thematic planning, one of the key driving (or hindering) forces behind Soviet cinema during these years. The establishment of the first cinema trade union is also important for a better understanding of how representation of varying interests changed in the 1930s and how film-makers and other workers interacted with the authorities and the cinema administration. Although this work seeks to explore new territory, it is not all encompassing. For instance, the author has decided to focus mainly on the feature film aspects of Soviet cinema as documentary film-making in this period deserves more comprehensive treatment than this book could allow.

If we are to apply the aforementioned method successfully, we must also understand the way in which the Bolsheviks attempted to justify and legitimise the basis of their power and see how their defensive ways of thinking, to a large extent, arose from the application of (an already demanding) Marxist theory to an impoverished Russia. Particular Bolshevik attitudes and ways of thinking were crucial in both shaping the Soviet system and almost every aspect of film industry development from the late 1920s onwards. The historical methodology of examining the mentalities of human beings has long-established foundations. It is usually associated with the French *Annales* school of historiography who established the approach through a series of studies which examined the attitudes

and values of various social groups over the long term, but with a particular interest in medieval themes.¹⁴ Moreover, a concern with distinctive mentalities has also long preoccupied scholars of Russian and Soviet history. This methodology has proven especially fruitful when examining the psychological world of individual Bolsheviks, such as Stalin, and has helped us to understand why they acted in the ways that they did.¹⁵ It has also been applied to collective mentalities manifested during the Revolutionary events of 1917, as well as in longer-term overviews of Russian history.¹⁶

Bolshevik Defensive Thinking

The attempt here to understand the Bolshevik way of thinking, and its impact on Soviet cinema in particular, will involve a slightly different methodological approach than those normally applied to deciphering attitudes and values in human history. The focus will be on the domain of politics as opposed to the sphere of social history often examined in the area of mentalities. The main subjects of this work are Bolshevik politicians, administrators, film-makers and cinema industry personnel in general. The aim is to show how the Bolsheviks tried to create a cinema that would serve their goals rather than to examine the reception of film among the masses or its role in their everyday lives. Thus the focus will be on the view of political history and cinema ‘from above’, as well as ‘the middle’, as Denise Youngblood describes it. The analysis does not seek to claim that there was only one mode of thought in Soviet society, rather, it tries to discover how a dominant mindset had such a huge impact on the film industry and its day-to-day functioning. The *Annales* historians have generally argued that attitudes have to be analysed over a long period of time as changes do not take place instantaneously.¹⁷ The argument presented here does not deny this point, but suggests that the Bolshevik defensive way of thinking, while having its roots in pre-Revolutionary attitudes, had its own distinctive Bolshevik stamp.

One of the central methods employed by the *Annales* school has been the use of figures and statistics as both a means of revealing changes in mentalities, as well as proving the scientific credentials of the historiographical enterprise by suggesting that it has the same claims of accuracy and objectivity as the social sciences. For example, this might involve trying to prove the decline of the Spanish Empire in the seventeenth century by carefully quantifying imports and exports of money and goods and the balance of trading relations with the New World. The

analysis adopted here does not use numerical methods as a means to confirm its argument, but it does adopt the concepts of 'structure' and 'agency' from the world of political science as a means of trying to establish how dominant patterns of Bolshevik thinking emerged. This approach is the first step in the methodology of this work.

Whenever we attempt to understand political, social or economic developments, either historical or contemporary, we try to establish the connection between agency (individuals or groups of individuals) and the structures in which they find themselves. In the twentieth century, academics working in social sciences and humanities have adopted differing views over where the emphasis should lie in this debate. Structuralism emphasises the importance of structure, arguing that observable political, social or economic events, processes and outcomes are merely the product of unobservable political, social or economic structures, of which 'actors are merely bearers'. An alternative, but equally simplistic view, can be found in the arguments of intentionalism which suggest that structures are the outcome of human agents (often, but not always individual) acting on rational, strategic intentions that are usually unfettered by any structural constraints. Over the past two decades, there have been various attempts to overcome the artificial separation of structure and agency in order to develop more sophisticated explanations of how humans have interacted with their world. Among the most effective of these has been critical realism. Critical realism contends that human agency must always be understood as a close interaction with existing and pre-constituted structures as these structures either constrain or enable individual or collective agents by the choices and strategies which they define. Human agents can, to some extent, transform structures through intentional acts which might have either intended or unintended consequences. Moreover, by combining their incomplete knowledge of existing structures with strategic learning, achieved by observing the consequences of their actions, agents are able to develop new strategies for future action.¹⁸ If we apply this basic conceptualisation to the historical agency of the Bolsheviks and the distinctive structures which defined the courses of action available to them, then we are able to see why their future approach to the cinema industry (and every other aspect of Soviet life) revealed less of a flexible strategic learning and more of an almost unchanging way of thinking. A particular defensiveness evolved which, to a large extent, reflected the gap between what the Bolsheviks wanted to achieve and what the structural realities allowed them to achieve.

Before we can establish a proper understanding of the relationship between Bolshevik measures and Russian structural realities, we must first look at the origins of their ideas, which can be traced back to Karl Marx. In order to understand the Bolsheviks' attempts to frame Russian reality within the terms of Marx's thinking we must briefly examine his fundamental ideas and the efforts to apply them to specifically Russian circumstances. Despite the debates on the scientific status of Marx's theoretical framework, his thought was fundamentally moral. Marx thought that human beings had the potential to be creative, free individuals, to realise themselves as fully as possible. Such emancipation had not been achieved mainly due to scarcity and the inevitable struggle for resources that were related to primitive levels of material productivity. The advent of capitalism and its mechanisation of labour showed that the masses could potentially become free of compulsive labour. Yet this could only be achieved if humanity could destroy the class system on which capitalism thrived. For Marx the central characteristics of capitalist society were class division and class exploitation, reinforced by a state that enabled the ruling class to maintain the exploitative status quo, through coercion if necessary. He believed that this intolerable situation would eventually culminate in a social revolution, leading to the end of capitalism and the emancipation of humanity.

Following the revolution the proletariat would seize and maintain political control in a transitional period whereby a socialist society would gradually replace its capitalist predecessor. The transitional period consisted of the replacement of 'bourgeois' class dictatorship with proletarian class dictatorship, justified by the fact that the working class constituted the large majority of the population. The transitional, proletarian class-controlled, socialist state would oversee the dismantling of the legal and institutional basis of capitalism, foster the development of the economic and productive powers of the state and protect the revolution from political enemies.¹⁹ In short, it would lay the basis for the future communist society. Marx assumed that the working class would be the agency, not only for the transitional period of social change, but also for the eventual emancipation of humanity as a whole from capitalism and its class system. The ultimate goal of communism consisted of a classless society of individuals freed from exploitation, drudgery and able to realise their creative capacities in a context free from 'bourgeois' institutions. This would largely be made possible by abundance and the final elimination of scarcity. The Bolsheviks adopted Marx's basic theory

as one of the key foundations of Party legitimacy. They claimed that he had uncovered the objective laws of human development through which all societies must pass, yet, despite their allegedly inevitable character, the Bolsheviks argued that such laws had to be partly helped along by political activism and this was particularly necessary in the Russian context.

It is well known that Marx's predictions failed to materialise in the West as he expected. When the Revolution took place in Russia, it was in a country where capitalism was still in its early stages and the state was dominated by a huge peasantry engaged in primitive agrarian forms of production, while a relatively small working class existed in the urban centres. Indeed, the pre-existing structures within which the Bolsheviks would attempt to realise Marx's vision certainly enabled the Bolsheviks to seize power. They managed, at least for a very brief period, to appeal to workers and peasants with promises to transform lives, end exploitation and expropriate land from the wealthy. In this way the Bolsheviks presented themselves as a saviour to all. Yet, economic backwardness would also prove to be an enormous constraint in the drive to implement Bolshevik policies. Lenin, who was acutely aware that Marx's schema did not correspond to Russia, adapted to the country's particular circumstances. In accordance with his belief that the working class did not have the knowledge and understanding to lead a social revolution, he argued that they would have to be led by a so-called vanguard. This vanguard consisted of the Communist Party, an elite organisation of class-conscious, professional revolutionaries who would lead the way from capitalism towards a classless society. However, in Russia the highly productive material basis to be created by advanced capitalism was absent. As Marx had contended, this well-developed material base was an essential prerequisite for a successful transition to a communist society where scarcity would be eliminated. Thus from the very beginning, the Bolsheviks were faced with the need to reconcile the gap between the need for a sophisticated material base and their claim that the new Soviet state had entered the transitional period referred to by Marx.²⁰ In truth the USSR began as a dictatorship of communist elites that would have to oversee full industrialisation and the drive for productive powers, before it could claim to have even reached the transitional period of socialism.

So from 1917 onwards, the Bolsheviks were presented with a huge problem and it was essentially a problem of political legitimacy. In the first place, the revolutionaries claimed to embody an ideology that sought to free the masses from the inhuman exploitation of capitalism. Yet, with

regard to its pre-existing economic and social structures, Russia was an undeveloped country and the arduous process of full industrialisation still lay ahead. The historical record had shown that the transformation of societies from predominantly agrarian economies into industrial giants usually involved hard toil, poor living standards and a significant level of exploitation. It seemed evident that Russia would struggle to avoid such difficulties and when industrialisation did take place under Stalin, it proved to be far more brutal than anyone could have imagined. So, from the very beginning, the Bolshevik claim that Party authority, to some extent, emanated from the inevitable developmental march of history was shown to be an unfounded and illegitimate argument. The Party tried to cover this glaring lack of theoretical legitimacy by still claiming that the USSR was in a transitional period, which it rather euphemistically described as 'socialist construction'.

The Bolsheviks also suffered from a further political legitimacy deficit. Marx had never adequately described the nature of worker control during the socialist transition period, but the implication was that it would involve the participation of the working masses in some form. Although Lenin argued for a vanguard party, he recognised that this must be temporary and that a truly socialist system had to provide democratic mass participation if society was to be successfully transformed. Such a view was enunciated in his *State and Revolution* (*Gosudarstvo i revoliutsiia*, 1917) where he supported mass participation in the administration of socialism and the abolition of the parliamentary system in favour of the true democracy of the commune. He believed that such developments would lead to the gradual withering away of the state. The post-Revolutionary reality was quite different. When the Bolsheviks were soundly defeated in the constituent assembly elections, it was clear that they did not have the popular backing they wanted. Their reaction was the closure of the assembly, the banning of rival parties and the establishment of repressive police control. From this point on, the masses, in whose name the Bolsheviks claimed to rule, would have no say in the running of the Soviet state. This was problematic, as the Bolsheviks' other source of legitimacy came from the people and, in particular, the working class. As soon as it was clear that the Bolsheviks did not have popular support, they tended to lean on the role of the elite vanguard party and, more importantly, Marxist-Leninist doctrine, which would always be the ultimate area of Party legitimacy.

Internal structural constraints were compounded by the regime's uneasy relationship with the rest of the world. Marx's vision of proletarian

revolution was a worldwide vision and, for a short period, the Bolsheviks held out some hope that revolutions might break out in other European countries. When this did not happen the USSR was isolated. Indeed, not only did the Western powers attempt to prevent the Bolsheviks from winning the civil war, there was also a reluctance to recognise the legitimacy of the Soviet Union as a geo-political entity for several years. Russia traditionally had a difficult relationship with the West. Rulers, such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great, had tried to emphasise the need for European modernisation, while Slavophiles argued about the unique nature of Russia which they believed should follow its own path. This historical tension manifested itself in the Bolshevik desire to see Russia reach and surpass European levels of development. At the same time, this development would be guided by Marxist ideology, which became both a way of attacking the capitalism of the West and a way of showing how Russia was unique. Throughout the existence of the Soviet state the Bolsheviks constantly believed they had to defend themselves from what they saw as an immoral, exploitative Western world.

Thus, in terms of the collective agency of the Bolsheviks, once they had seized power they could not simply proceed towards the transformation of the pre-existing structures of tsarist Russia. On an even more fundamental level the Bolsheviks had to prove the legitimacy of their ideas and their right to hold power. On the one hand, this meant intellectual self-justification which, as we have seen, was achieved by emphasising the importance of revolutionary elites and the role of the vanguard party. However, more importantly their vision had to involve a significant degree of mass support and participation which, as we have also seen, was largely absent when the Bolsheviks came to power. Certain historians of a purely totalitarian persuasion have sometimes over-emphasised the combination of ideology and terror, implying that the Bolsheviks treated the masses with contempt and, therefore, had no interest in whether or not they had their support.²¹ But such accounts fail to recognise the importance of the mass of ordinary people for the potential realisation of Marxist ideals. Coercion was, of course, an option available to the Bolsheviks and one that was often employed in the 1930s. Yet, pure coercion can rarely be the sole basis for the effective functioning of a modern state. The industrialisation of the Soviet Union required mass cooperation to achieve its extremely ambitious goals. But the Bolsheviks wanted more than cooperation. They wanted the masses to *believe* in the ideals of the classless society of emancipated human beings and to be

part of the transformation towards that society. It was not their intention to enslave ordinary people.

The Bolsheviks were subject to constraints on various different levels. As we have seen, on a fundamental level they had to contend with economic backwardness, which always threatened to undermine their entire project. But they were also constrained by political and social issues. In particular, their claim to embody the will of the masses was problematic given their ideological partiality to the working class. They may have been able to offer a brief and superficial appeal to the peasantry, but the Bolsheviks believed in collective ownership, while the peasant was desperate to maintain a significant degree of private farming.

The Bolsheviks were also constrained and, to some extent, influenced by the political mentalities and traditions of the past. Generally, autocracy and coercive government have been regarded as central to Russian history. While there is a great deal of truth in this, recent research has shown that there was a long-standing pre-Revolutionary belief in strong government constrained by religious and national tradition in the interests of the masses. If the Bolsheviks were too repressive, they might be seen as a continuation of the worst aspects of tsarism, but if they failed to be ruthless, they might be perceived as weak utopians. The Bolsheviks ultimately leaned towards the idea of an extremely powerful and unconstrained government, which was consistent with their monolithic view that any power ceded to the opposition, or even the slightest element of pluralism, would destroy the entire Revolutionary enterprise. Another aspect of the pre-Revolutionary political mode of thinking was a belief in the centrality of the state not merely as a mechanism for maintaining public order and raising taxes, but also for administering justice, acting as a moral arbitrator in public affairs and playing a substantial role in economic ownership and regulation. Thus the substantial role of the state was already firmly rooted before the arrival of the Bolsheviks. Nonetheless, the communist agenda was very specific in that it sought to use the state's resources to gain the support of and mobilise the masses toward a distinctive political vision, eliminating private property in favour of a state-led form of public ownership of the means of production, distribution and exchange.²²

These factors limited the strategies open to the Bolsheviks. The demands they faced from millions of peasants and workers meant they had to be decisive, strong-willed and, most importantly, they had to produce visible results quickly in order to maintain their hold on power. Following years of civil war, the revolutionaries sensibly adopted the course

of compromise through the NEP (New Economic Policy) which allowed them to consolidate their position and foster economic recovery. However, the Bolsheviks were never satisfied with compromise. Their revolutionary model was preoccupied with the need to fit Russia into the Marxist historical schema and to reach the level of economic and social development that Marx had seen as a necessary prerequisite for the socialist transition period. This necessitated rapid economic development as well as radical policies that would prove the legitimacy of Bolshevik power. By the end of the 1920s, the decision to embark on holistic transformation had been made. Certainly, this was partly due to Stalin's political manoeuvring, yet it was also fully consistent with the Bolshevik revolutionary 'all or nothing' model and their impatience to enact radical programmes.

The structural constraints that the Bolsheviks faced both internally and externally meant that their choices and strategies were always restricted. Their choice to go down the path of exclusive, elite dictatorship meant that they would always be on the defensive. Their inability to reconcile a grandiose ideological outlook with these structural constraints led to the evolution of a defensive way of thinking, a sense of constantly being under siege. As well as the constant need for self-justification, the Bolsheviks knew that the greater mass of the people, including the huge peasantry, were not with them. This became more obvious during the grain requisitioning onslaught after the Revolution and the later industrialisation and collectivisation programmes. In addition to the realisation that the majority of the people were not sympathetic to the regime, the revolutionaries genuinely believed that there were traitors, enemies, spies and saboteurs throughout society intent on destroying the communist dream. This was accompanied by the fear that the capitalist countries were also attempting to undermine the Soviet system by any means necessary. When a regime believes that it is under siege it takes defensive measures not unlike those adopted during a war. Thus the strategy of holistic transformation was guided and shaped by the revolutionaries' defensive outlook. However, the reaction of defending or closing up, especially when radical measures had unintended consequences, meant that the Bolsheviks tended not to learn from their mistakes. Their strong belief in a rigid revolutionary model meant, as we shall see, that the Soviet government and cinema administration continued to implement failing policies to the cinema industry, fearing that openness to new ideas might be seen as an acknowledgement of political failure.

Implications for Cinema

How does what we have said relate to our central concern, Soviet cinema? In order to answer this question we must examine the formal, intended functions of cinema in Soviet society. Cinema presented the Bolsheviks with a potentially powerful weapon, as it was not only an exciting new technology; it was also accessible and appealing to the masses as an art form that they could engage in. From the communist perspective, cinema could serve many crucial functions. First of all, it could play its role in the struggle to circumvent the problems implied by illiteracy. Yet, this was not merely a practical application. The liquidation of illiteracy would be done within the terms of reference and ideas of communist ideology. Therefore, cinema would politically educate the masses so that they would develop a conscious understanding of the Revolution, the new socialist reality and their part in that reality. At its most ambitious, such an education would contribute to the creation of a 'New Soviet Man', a highly moral, socialist paragon of virtue, dedicated to the final goal of communism. However, the most fundamental task of cinema was never publicly spelled out. As we have argued, the Bolsheviks' defensive way of thinking was central to their outlook and this had both an impact on their idea of cinema's purpose and how it should be organised. The cinema industry became both part of the quest for legitimacy and part of the frontline of political and ideological defence. It had to legitimise and protect communist ideology, power and, most importantly, the reality that they had given rise to. The communists could not properly explain why their hold on power did not correspond to the supposedly scientific Marxist theoretical framework to a sceptical intelligentsia, although the average Soviet citizen was almost certainly not interested in such issues. Nonetheless, ordinary people *were* concerned with the everyday reality that sprang from Bolshevik thinking. The communists had to reconcile their rhetoric of human emancipation with the grim Soviet reality of breakneck industrialisation and the hardship and low living standards that came with such a transformation. Party leaders also knew that achieving mass cooperation was essential for the realisation of their goals. So they had to convince the masses of the necessity of their effective participation in socialist construction, by claiming that they were working towards a communist paradise. Thus cinema was to play a fundamental role, not only in politically educating and moulding the new man, but also in showing ordinary people that their feats and sacrifices were in their own interests and the interests of society as a whole. Cinema would

play a crucial role in helping to keep the masses on side while they made good the modernisation gap required to give them the better life that they yearned for and to provide an interim legitimacy for the Bolsheviks. Indeed, film's political function went beyond political education, mobilisation and persuasion. As we shall see in the final chapter, film would also play a key role in sharing the Bolsheviks' burden of political responsibility with ordinary citizens.

The Bolshevik defensive way of thinking that emerged was shaped by a range of past and present structures but, most of all, by the irreconcilable gap between their political aims and the pre-existing structures within which they had to operate. This defensiveness sought to protect the communist ideal and Soviet power from being exposed as fraudulent. It guided policy and administration, which rested on the uneasy foundations of profound political insecurity and illegitimacy, and was a disaster for Soviet cinema, bringing it to the brink of productive and creative collapse. As we shall observe, this defensiveness manifested itself in many different ways on both an institutional and an individual level. Ultimately, its main effect was to undermine the very industry that had been intended to serve as a frontline in the ideological defence of the Bolshevik regime.

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When the Bolsheviks seized power in the Soviet Union during 1917, they were suffering from a substantial political legitimacy deficit. Uneasy political foundations meant that they were always on the defensive and cinema became a key part of the strategy to protect the existence of the USSR. This welcome book shows how one of film's central functions was as an important means of convincing the masses that the regime was legitimate and a bearer of historical truth.

Based on extensive research in archives and primary sources, the book examines the interaction between politics and the Soviet cinema industry during the period between Stalin's rise to power and the beginning of the Great Patriotic War. This was the era when the Bolsheviks were trying to develop a 'cinema for the millions', which sought to engage Soviet citizens politically by carefully blending entertainment with the communist message.

Jamie Miller investigates how political and administrative decision-making, censorship, thematic planning and purges were shaped by the Bolsheviks' defensive outlook, which in turn had a largely negative impact on the production process. He examines the role of film unions and societies, compares the development of two different studios and looks at the education system for cinema personnel. He also analyses key films of the period, including the classic musical *Circus*, the class enemy drama *The Party Card* and the political epic *The Great Citizen*.

'Superbly researched and well written, this fascinating book is the first full-length political history of Soviet cinema during a tumultuous period, the "long thirties", 1929–41. Miller provides a vivid depiction of the processes by which increasing state efforts to control the film industry led to chaos and failure. As such, this work is indispensable reading not only for specialists in Soviet film and culture, but also for anyone interested in the dynamics of cultural production in an authoritarian society.'

– Denise Youngblood, University of Vermont

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